
California State Personnel Board

Recommendations and Resources for the Translation of Written Documents

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CALIFORNIA STATE PERSONNEL BOARD

RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESOURCES FOR THE TRANSLATION OF WRITTEN DOCUMENTS

Purpose and Background

In an effort to assist California State departments in the translation of written materials, research was conducted by the California State Personnel Board to identify professionally accepted procedures and tools for translation. Experts in the field of translation located in private and public organizations and translation associations were contacted and a thorough literature review was performed. The following guidelines are based on this research and specifically incorporate guidelines described in an extensive report “Best Practice Recommendations for Hospital-Based Interpreter Services” conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH). MDPH particularly addressed translation guidelines in the section titled “Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Department of Public Health Translation Procedure for Written Materials.”

General Recommendations

- ❖ *Type of Translation:* Given the difference in structure, syntax, and connotation of words or phrases for different languages a non-literal translation of written documents is recommended. Verbatim or literal translation stifles the ability for translators to access a wide range of words and expressions in the target language that could properly convey the intended message in an appropriate manner for the target language and culture. Non-literal translation also allows translators to incorporate the appropriate grammatical structure and flow of the target language and foster a better comprehension of the intended message.
- ❖ *Number of Translators:* The use of two translators for the translation of one written document is recommended. One translator conducts the initial translation and the second reviews and edits the translation while checking for accuracy, tone, and appropriate use of the language.
- ❖ *English Version:* Some departments set a reading level for English documents. However, the reading level of the document should be relative to the type of document being translated. For example, a report summarizing statistics and research on current medical innovations will most likely be originally written in English at a higher reading level than a generic pamphlet which warns about the dangers of secondhand smoke.

- ❖ *Assessing Reading Level:* Most experts stated that there are many more factors, other than reading level, which contribute to conducting a valid translation that is equivalent in meaning across languages. Most reading level programs or formulas measure syntactic characteristics (e.g., sentence length, number of syllable per words, etc.) in order to evaluate reading comprehension level. However, the structures of different languages vary in these characteristics. For example, Spanish has, on average, more syllables per word than English. One readability formula (i.e., FRY) addressed this difference; however, no formulas address a long list of factors contributing to the understanding of translated written material (e.g., idiomatic expressions, transference, modulation, compensation, synonymy, and functional/descriptive equivalency). Most experts agree that a well-trained translator can assess the reading level of the original text and translate accordingly.
- ❖ *Methods for ensuring equivalency:*

Focus Groups: Most experts and translators, who were interviewed, recommended the use of focus groups as method for ensuring reading comprehension, cultural appropriateness, and proper use of the target language in translated materials. MDPH specifically recommends translators to “work closely with the people from that [target] culture (i.e., community providers, community residents, and/or DPH staff) to make certain that the text and messages are culturally appropriate.” As an example, suppose an information pamphlet on medical benefits is to be sent to seniors in the community who are relatively recent Russian immigrants. This target group may have little to no ability when reading English but possess high reading levels in Russian. It would therefore be beneficial to assemble a sample of this target group to ensure comprehension of written materials, proper reading level, and cultural appropriateness (i.e., ensuring there are not culturally offensive messages or pictures).

Professionally Trained Translators: Professionally trained and certified translators should not only be experts in the target and source language but experts in the process of translation. This entails creating a written document that is equivalent in meaning in both languages, addressing the proper rules of grammar and structure in the target language, and taking into account cultural appropriateness. Guidelines for selecting a translator are outlined below.

Department Staff

Department staff with the designated responsibility for written translation should ensure that translators (whether internal or external) follow the procedure described below and ensure that translators have a complete understanding of the meaning of the original (English version) message.

The Translation Process

Pre-translation Steps

1. Materials Review: Department staff should thoroughly review English materials, prior to translation, in order to assess whether proper grammar is used and accurate information is provided. Accuracy of information should be verified with appropriate subject matter experts. For example, qualified medical personnel should review a pamphlet detailing the importance of immunizations for babies in order to ensure all information is accurate. Clarity in word usage and placement of written text should also be assessed to ensure clear processing of the written message. Care should also be taken to avoid idiomatic expressions or colloquialisms (i.e., expressions or sayings which do not have the same meaning in other cultures) in the original English text.
2. Project Planning: Before hiring a translator, department staff should develop a timeline for the translation ensuring that enough time exists for review and revisions. It usually takes a longer amount of time than expected to complete a translation.
3. Selecting the Translator: When contracting a project out to a private translator it is important to know whether that individual is adequately trained to conduct an accurate translation. Unfortunately, according to the Northwest Translators and Interpreters Society (NOTIS), the United States, unlike other countries, has no federal or state licensing or certification for translators. Some credentials are available to translators working in some language pairs; however, many languages do not have certification or credential programs available in the United States. Below are some associations, acknowledged by NOTIS, which offer accreditation or certificates for some languages, their web site links, and a brief description of their programs.
 - *American Translators Association (ATA)*: ATA has an accreditation program for 25 different language pairs. A language pair denotes the direction in which the person is accredited to make the translation. For example, a translator may be accredited to translate English to French but not French to English. The ATA web site also has a helpful “Directory of Translation and Interpreter Services” that allows for searches for specific language translators and interpreters who are accredited. Web site: www.atanet.org.
 - *The Translators and Interpreters Guild (TTIG)*: TTIG is the only nationwide union for translators and interpreters and it offers certification and referral services to certified members. Web site: www.ttig.org
 - *Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS)*: DSHS selects translators to work on DSHS translations by first screening with a set of exams including a five section written exam measuring ethics, knowledge of medical terminology in English and the target language, and knowledge of syntax and grammar in English and the target language. The written is followed up by an

oral exam testing site translation and interpretation skills. This exam exists in eight target languages.

Given that it is not mandatory in the United States and certification programs do not exist for many languages it is possible that some translators may not have certification. In fact, NOTIS specifically notes that there are many excellent and experienced translators who are not accredited or certified. If a translator is not certified or accredited ask for references and work samples from previous projects. In addition, verify at the translator's educational background and experience with the target language and translation of that language.

Accountability: The Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators Incorporated (AUSIT) offers caution to “buyers” of translations for “sellers” (translators) who can only respond “That’s just the way it is” to questions concerning decisions made in their work. AUSIT details that “translation is not magic” and translators should always be able to explain their work as translation is “a conscious and intellectual process.” That ability to thoroughly explain the process used is the mark of a professional translator. AUSIT warns that a bilingual person with no real translation skills will often have a difficult time explaining their work and decisions and “hide behind the language barrier.” A back translation by a second independent translator (discussed below) may also provide necessary proof of an accurate translation.

The Translation

4. Assigning the translation: Department staff and subject matter experts should thoroughly discuss with the translators the purpose of the materials and the characteristics of the target population (e.g., average age, country of origin, relative literacy level in the target language, etc.). Staff and translators should review and discuss any terminology that is confusing to translators or does not exist in their language. In this situation, department staff may need to discuss the underlying message by using a variety of relevant examples until the meaning is clearly understood by translators.
5. During the translation: After thoroughly discussing the assignment and clearing up any questions, the translator should prepare the first draft with the goal of full expression of thoughts. The translator should then read the draft aloud for style and flow always keeping in mind the comprehension level of the target reader population. Finally, the translator should proofread, edit, and revise as necessary.
6. Second translator: The translation should always be proofread by a second translator. Possible errors and/or suggested revisions should be discussed in detail with the original translator. If necessary, the second translator can provide a back translation from the other language into English to ensure equivalency in underlying message. If there are disagreements about the revisions and changes, the two translators should discuss the issues and negotiate the changes. If an agreement cannot be reached a third party who speaks the language should be consulted. Throughout the process

translators should be encouraged to ask department staff any questions with regard to the meaning of the original message.

7. Focus Group: At this point the most preferable step is to assemble a focus group of individuals with the same characteristics (e.g., average age, socioeconomic background, gender, education level, ethnicity, country of origin, etc.) as those who will be receiving the translated materials. Given time and resources, this step is not always feasible; however, it is important to note that all experts contacted highly recommended this procedure as a means of ensuring the comprehension of translated materials. Where possible it should be used as a final verification of appropriate translation.
8. Pictures: Translators and focus groups (if feasible) should carefully review any pictures displayed in the translated materials to ensure that they are not culturally offensive to the target population.